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OFFICE OF GOVERNMENT ETHICS

5 CFR Part 2634

RIN 3209-AA00

Revisions to the Certificates of Divestiture Regulation

AGENCY: Office of Government Ethics (OGE).

ACTION: Final rule amendments.

SUMMARY: In this final rule, the Office of Government Ethics has rewritten its regulation concerning Certificates of Divestiture in plain language. This rule also revises certain procedures for issuing Certificates of Divestiture and the definition of permitted property into which proceeds of the sale of property are reinvested.

DATES: *Effective Date:* August 27, 2004.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Deborah J. Bortot, Office of Government Ethics; Telephone: 202-482-9300; TDD: 202-482-9293; FAX: 202-482-9237.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

I. Background

Section 1043 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986, 26 U.S.C. 1043, was enacted as part of the Ethics Reform Act of 1989 (Pub. L. 101-194). Section 1043 authorizes the Director of OGE to issue a Certificate of Divestiture to an eligible person who is divesting property in order to comply with a Federal conflict of interest law, regulation, rule, or Executive order, or if requested by a congressional committee as a condition of confirmation. A person who receives a Certificate of Divestiture may defer payment of capital gains tax as long as he or she timely purchases certain permitted property with the proceeds of the sale. OGE published an interim rule on April 18, 1990 (at 55 FR 14407-14409) implementing section 1043. On June 25, 1996, the Office of Government Ethics published a final rule at 61 FR

32633-32636. The final rule was based on comments to the interim rule and on OGE's experience under the interim rule and the May 1990 Technical Corrections to the Ethics Reform Act of 1989 (Pub. L. 101-280), which amended section 1043 of the Internal Revenue Code of 1986. The OGE Certificates of Divestiture executive branchwide regulation is now codified at subpart J of 5 CFR part 2634.

On January 13, 2004, OGE published a set of proposed amendments to the regulation, proposing to make certain improvements. See 69 FR 1954-1957. The proposed rule provided a 60-day comment period. The Office of Government Ethics received one comment letter from an organization. After a careful review of the comment letter and making some additional plain language modifications, OGE is publishing this final rule.

II. Summary of Comments and Revisions

We have attempted to improve the current Certificates of Divestiture regulation by: Organizing the material more logically; using shorter sentences; eliminating unnecessary technical language; and stating the rule's requirements more clearly. The one comment letter suggested many changes to make the regulation even simpler. After careful review, OGE has adopted some of the suggestions. In particular, we have redrafted §§ 2634.1001 and 2634.1003 of the proposed rule to make them easier to understand. Consequently, § 2634.1001 of the proposed rule is now divided into §§ 2634.1001 and 2634.1002, and proposed sections 2634.1002-2634.1007 have been renumbered in this final rule accordingly.

The final rule retains the same revisions as set forth in the proposed rule. First, we changed the meaning of a "diversified investment fund," in paragraph (2) of the definition of permitted property in new (renumbered) § 2634.1003, to track the definition of diversified mutual fund and diversified unit investment trust as those terms are used in 5 CFR 2640.102.¹ Second,

¹ When the Certificate of Divestiture rule was first published in April 1990, the definition of "diversified investment fund" included common trust funds maintained by banks. At that time, common trust funds were required to be diversified under rules published by the Comptroller of the Currency. However, in December 1996, the Office

several changes will streamline and simplify the procedure OGE uses to issue a Certificate of Divestiture. The final rule clarifies the information related to financial disclosure that needs to be submitted as part of the Certificate of Divestiture request and simplifies the procedure related to the timing of a submission of a request to OGE.

III. Matters of Regulatory Procedure

Executive Order 12866

In promulgating this final regulation, the Office of Government Ethics has adhered to the regulatory philosophy and the applicable principles of regulation set forth in section 1 of Executive Order 12866, Regulatory Planning and Review. This regulation has also been reviewed by the Office of Management and Budget under that Executive order. Moreover, in accordance with section 6(a)(3)(B) of E.O. 12866, the preambles to the proposed and final revisions, to be codified in a revised subpart J of 5 CFR part 2634, note the legal basis and benefits of as well as the need for the regulatory action. There should be no appreciable increase in costs to OGE or the executive branch of the Federal Government in administering this regulation, once it becomes effective, since the provisions only clarify and improve the Certificates of Divestiture regulatory procedures. Finally, this rulemaking is not economically significant under the Executive order and will not interfere with State, local or tribal governments.

Executive Order 12988

As Acting Director of the Office of Government Ethics, I have reviewed this final amendatory regulation in light of section 3 of Executive Order 12988, Civil Justice Reform, and certify that it meets the applicable standards provided therein.

Regulatory Flexibility Act

As Acting Director of the Office of Government Ethics, I certify under the Regulatory Flexibility Act (5 U.S.C.

of the Comptroller of the Currency eliminated the diversification requirement. See 61 FR 68543, 68551. Therefore, common trust funds are not a suitable alternative for permitted property and have been deleted from the definition of diversified investment fund. Eligible persons who invested in common trust funds as permitted property prior to the effective date of this final rule may continue to hold those funds.

chapter 6) that this amendatory rule will not have a significant economic impact on a substantial number of small entities because it primarily affects Federal executive branch employees and members of their immediate families.

Paperwork Reduction Act

The Paperwork Reduction Act (44 U.S.C. chapter 35) does not apply to this final amended regulation because it does not contain any information collection requirements that require the approval of the Office of Management and Budget.

Unfunded Mandates Reform Act

For purposes of the Unfunded Mandates Reform Act of 1995 (2 U.S.C. chapter 25, subchapter II), this final rule will not significantly or uniquely affect small governments and will not result in increased expenditures by State, local, and tribal governments, in the aggregate, or by the private sector, of \$100 million or more (as adjusted for inflation) in any one year.

Congressional Review Act

The Office of Government Ethics has determined that this rulemaking involves a nonmajor rule under the Congressional Review Act (5 U.S.C. chapter 8) and will submit a report thereon to the U.S. Senate, House of Representatives and General Accounting Office in accordance with that law at the same time this rulemaking document is sent to the Office of the Federal Register for publication in the **Federal Register**.

List of Subjects in 5 CFR Part 2634

Certificates of divestiture, Conflict of interests, Financial disclosure, Government employees, Penalties, Privacy, Reporting and recordkeeping requirements, Trusts and trustees.

Approved: July 21, 2004.

Marilyn L. Glynn,

Acting Director, Office of Government Ethics.

■ Accordingly, for the reasons set forth in the preamble, the Office of Government Ethics is amending 5 CFR part 2634 as follows:

PART 2634—EXECUTIVE BRANCH FINANCIAL DISCLOSURE, QUALIFIED TRUSTS, AND CERTIFICATES OF DIVESTITURE

■ 1. The authority citation for part 2634 continues to read as follows:

Authority: 5 U.S.C. App. (Ethics in Government Act of 1978); 26 U.S.C. 1043; Pub. L. 101–410, 104 Stat. 890, 28 U.S.C. 2461 note (Federal Civil Penalties Inflation Adjustment Act of 1990), as amended by Sec. 31001, Pub. L. 104–134, 110 Stat. 1321 (Debt Collection Improvement Act of 1996); E.O.

12674, 54 FR 15159, 3 CFR, 1989 Comp., p. 215, as modified by E.O. 12731, 55 FR 42547, 3 CFR, 1990 Comp., p. 306.

■ 2. Subpart J of part 2634 is revised to read as follows:

Subpart J—Certificates of Divestiture

Sec.

- 2634.1001 Overview.
- 2634.1002 Role of the Internal Revenue Service.
- 2634.1003 Definitions.
- 2634.1004 General rule.
- 2634.1005 How to obtain a Certificate of Divestiture.
- 2634.1006 Rollover into permitted property.
- 2634.1007 Cases in which Certificates of Divestiture will not be issued.
- 2634.1008 Public access to a Certificate of Divestiture.

Subpart J—Certificates of Divestiture

§ 2634.1001 Overview.

(a) *Scope.* 26 U.S.C. 1043 and the rules of this subpart allow an eligible person to defer paying capital gains tax on property sold to comply with conflict of interest requirements. To defer the gains, an eligible person must obtain a Certificate of Divestiture from the Director of the Office of Government Ethics before selling the property. This subpart describes the circumstances when an eligible person may obtain a Certificate of Divestiture and establishes the procedure that the Office of Government Ethics uses to issue Certificates of Divestiture.

(b) *Purpose.* The purpose of section 1043 and this subpart is to minimize the burden that would result from paying capital gains tax on the sale of assets to comply with conflict of interest requirements. Minimizing this burden aids in attracting and retaining highly qualified personnel in the executive branch and ensures the confidence of the public in the integrity of Government officials and decision-making processes.

§ 2634.1002 Role of the Internal Revenue Service.

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has jurisdiction over the tax aspects of a divestiture made pursuant to a Certificate of Divestiture. Eligible persons seeking to defer capital gains:

- (a) Must follow IRS requirements for reporting dispositions of property and electing under section 1043 not to recognize capital gains; and
- (b) Should consult a personal tax advisor or the IRS for guidance on these matters.

§ 2634.1003 Definitions.

For purposes of this subpart:

Eligible person means:

(1) Any officer or employee of the executive branch of the Federal Government, except a person who is a special Government employee as defined in 18 U.S.C. 202;

(2) The spouse or any minor or dependent child of the individual referred to in paragraph (1) of this definition; and

(3) Any trustee holding property in a trust in which an individual referred to in paragraph (1) or (2) of this definition has a beneficial interest in principal or income.

Permitted property means:

(1) An obligation of the United States; or

(2) A diversified investment fund. A diversified investment fund is a diversified mutual fund or diversified unit investment trust, as defined in 5 CFR 2640.102(a), (k) and (u);

(3) Provided, however, a permitted property cannot be any holding prohibited by statute, regulation, rule, or Executive order. As a result, requirements applicable to specific agencies and positions may limit an eligible person's choices of permitted property. An employee seeking a Certificate of Divestiture should consult the appropriate designated agency ethics official to determine whether a statute, regulation, rule, or Executive order may limit choices of permitted property.

§ 2634.1004 General rule.

(a) The Director of the Office of Government Ethics may issue a Certificate of Divestiture for specific property in accordance with the procedures of § 2634.1005 of this subpart if:

(1) The Director determines that divestiture of the property by an eligible person is reasonably necessary to comply with 18 U.S.C. 208, or any other Federal conflict of interest statute, regulation, rule, or Executive order; or

(2) A congressional committee requires divestiture as a condition of confirmation.

(b) The Director of the Office of Government Ethics cannot issue a Certificate of Divestiture for property that already has been sold.

Example 1 to § 2634.1004: An employee is directed to divest shares of stock, a limited partnership interest, and foreign currencies. If the sale of these assets will result in capital gains under the Internal Revenue Code, the employee may request and receive a Certificate of Divestiture.

Example 2 to § 2634.1004: An employee of the Department of Commerce is directed to divest his shares of XYZ stock acquired through the exercise of options held in an employee benefit plan. His gain from the sale of the stock will be treated as ordinary

income. Because only capital gains realized under Federal tax law are eligible for deferral under section 1043, a Certificate of Divestiture cannot be issued for the sale of the XYZ stock.

Example 3 to § 2634.1004: During her Senate confirmation hearing, a nominee to a Department of Defense (DOD) position is directed to divest stock in a DOD contractor as a condition of her confirmation. Eager to comply with the order to divest, the nominee sells her stock immediately after the hearing and prior to being confirmed by the Senate. Once she is a DOD employee, she requests a Certificate of Divestiture for the stock. Because the Office of Government Ethics cannot issue a Certificate of Divestiture for property that has already been divested, the employee's request for a Certificate of Divestiture will be denied.

Example 4 to § 2634.1004: After receiving a Certificate of Divestiture, the spouse of a Food and Drug Administration employee sold stock in a regulated company. Between the time of the request for the Certificate of Divestiture and the sale of the stock, the stock price dropped and the spouse sold the stock at a loss. Because the sale of the stock did not result in capital gains, the spouse has no need for the Certificate of Divestiture and cannot submit it to the Internal Revenue Service for deferral of gains. No further action need be taken by the employee or the employee's spouse in connection with the Certificate of Divestiture.

§ 2634.1005 How to obtain a Certificate of Divestiture.

(a) *Employee's request to the designated agency ethics official.* An employee seeking a Certificate of Divestiture must submit a written request to the designated agency ethics official at his or her agency. The request must contain:

(1) A full and specific description of the property that will be divested. For example, if the property is corporate stock, the request must include the number of shares for which the eligible person seeks a Certificate of Divestiture;

(2) A brief description of how the eligible person acquired the property;

(3) A statement that the eligible person holding the property has agreed to divest the property; and

(4)(i) The date that the requirement to divest first applied; or

(ii) The date the employee first agreed that the eligible person would divest the property in order to comply with conflict of interest requirements.

(b) *Designated agency ethics official's submission to the Office of Government Ethics.* The designated agency ethics official must forward to the Director of the Office of Government Ethics the employee's written request described in paragraph (a) of this section. In addition, the designated agency ethics official must submit:

(1) A copy of the employee's latest financial disclosure report. If the

employee is not required to file a financial disclosure report, the designated agency ethics official must obtain from the employee, and submit to the Office of Government Ethics, a listing of the employee's interests that would be required to be disclosed on a confidential financial disclosure report excluding gifts and travel reimbursements. For purposes of this listing, the reporting period is the preceding twelve months from the date the requirement to divest first applied or the date the employee first agreed that the eligible person would divest the property;

(2) An opinion that describes why divestiture of the property is reasonably necessary to comply with 18 U.S.C. 208, or any other Federal conflict of interest statute, regulation, rule, or Executive order; and

(3) A brief description of the employee's position or a citation to a statute that sets forth the duties of the position.

(c) *Divestitures required by a congressional committee.* In the case of a divestiture required by a congressional committee as a condition of confirmation, the designated agency ethics official must submit appropriate evidence that the committee requires the divestiture. A transcript of congressional testimony or a written statement from the designated agency ethics official concerning the committee's custom regarding divestiture are examples of evidence of the committee's requirements.

(d) *Divestitures for property held in a trust.* In the case of divestiture of property held in a trust, the employee must submit a copy of the trust instrument, as well as a list of the trust's current holdings, unless the holdings are listed on the employee's most recent financial disclosure report. In certain cases involving divestiture of property held in a trust, the Director may not issue a Certificate of Divestiture unless the parties take actions which, in the opinion of the Director, are appropriate to exclude, to the extent practicable, parties other than eligible persons from benefitting from the deferral of capital gains. Such actions may include, as permitted by applicable State law, division of the trust into separate portfolios, special distributions, dissolution of the trust, or anything else deemed feasible by the Director, in his or her sole discretion.

Example 1 to paragraph (d): An employee has a 90% beneficial interest in an irrevocable trust created by his grandfather. His four adult children have the remaining 10% beneficial interest in the trust. A number of the assets held in the trust must

be sold to comply with conflicts of interest requirements. Due to State law, no action can be taken to separate the trust assets. Because the adult children have a small interest in the trust and the assets cannot be separated, the Director may consider issuing a Certificate of Divestiture to the trustee for the sale of all of the conflicting assets.

(e) *Time requirements.* A request for a Certificate of Divestiture does not extend the time in which an employee otherwise must divest property required to be divested pursuant to an ethics agreement, or prohibited by statute, regulation, rule, or Executive order. Therefore, an employee must submit his or her request for a Certificate of Divestiture as soon as possible once the requirement to divest becomes applicable. The Office of Government Ethics will consider requests submitted beyond the applicable time period for divestiture. If the designated agency ethics official submits a request to the Office of Government Ethics beyond the applicable time period for divestiture, he must explain the reason for the delay. (See 5 CFR 2634.802 and 2635.403 for rules relating to the time requirements for divestiture.)

(f) *Response by the Office of Government Ethics.* After reviewing the materials submitted by the employee and the designated agency ethics official, and making a determination that all requirements have been met, the Director will issue a Certificate of Divestiture. The certificate will be sent to the designated agency ethics official who will then forward it to the employee.

§ 2634.1006 Rollover into permitted property.

(a) *Reinvestment of proceeds.* In order to qualify for deferral of capital gains, an eligible person must reinvest the proceeds from the sale of the property divested pursuant to a Certificate of Divestiture into permitted property during the 60-day period beginning on the date of the sale. The proceeds may be reinvested into one or more types of permitted property.

Example 1 to paragraph (a): A recently hired employee of the Department of Transportation receives a Certificate of Divestiture for the sale of a large block of stock in an airline. He may split the proceeds of the sale and reinvest them in an S&P Index Fund, a diversified Growth Stock Fund, and U.S. Treasury bonds.

Example 2 to paragraph (a): The Secretary of Treasury sells certain stock after receiving a Certificate of Divestiture and is considering reinvesting the proceeds from the sale into U.S. Treasury securities. However, because the Secretary of the Treasury is prohibited by 31 U.S.C. 329 from being involved in buying obligations of the United States Government, the Secretary cannot reinvest the proceeds in

such securities. However, she may invest the proceeds in a diversified mutual fund. See the definition of *permitted property* at § 2634.1003.

(b) *Internal Revenue Service reporting requirements.* An eligible person who elects to defer the recognition of capital gains from the sale of property pursuant to a Certificate of Divestiture must follow Internal Revenue Service rules for reporting the sale of the property and the reinvestment transaction.

§ 2634.1007 Cases in which Certificates of Divestiture will not be issued.

The Director of the Office of Government Ethics, in his or her sole discretion, may deny a request for a Certificate of Divestiture in cases where an unfair or unintended benefit would result. Examples of such cases include:

(a) *Employee benefit plans.* The Director will not issue a Certificate of Divestiture if the property is held in a pension, profit-sharing, stock bonus, or other employee benefit plan and can otherwise be rolled over into an eligible tax-deferred retirement plan within the 60-day reinvestment period.

(b) *Complete divestiture.* The Director will not issue a Certificate of Divestiture unless the employee agrees to divest all of the property that presents a conflict of interest, as well as other similar or related property that presents a conflict of interest under a Federal conflict of interest statute, regulation, rule, or Executive order. However, any property that qualifies for a regulatory exemption at 5 CFR part 2640 need not be divested for a Certificate of Divestiture to be issued.

Example 1 to paragraph (b): A Department of Agriculture employee owns shares of stock in Better Workspace, Inc. valued at \$25,000. As part of his official duties, the employee is assigned to evaluate bids for a contract to renovate office space at his agency. The Department's designated agency ethics official discovers that Better Workspace is one of the companies that has submitted a bid and directs the employee to sell his stock in the company. Because Better Workspace is a publicly traded security, the employee could retain up to \$15,000 of the stock under the regulatory exemption for interests in securities at 5 CFR 2640.202(a). He would be able to request a Certificate of Divestiture for the \$10,000 of Better Workspace stock that is not covered by the exemption. Alternatively, he could request a Certificate of Divestiture for the entire \$25,000 worth of stock. If he chooses to sell his stock down to an amount permitted under the regulatory exemption, the Office of Government Ethics will not issue additional Certificates of Divestiture if the value of the stock goes above \$15,000 again.

(c) *Property acquired under improper circumstances.* The Director will not issue a Certificate of Divestiture:

(1) If the eligible person acquired the property at a time when its acquisition was prohibited by statute, regulation, rule, or Executive order; or

(2) If circumstances would otherwise create the appearance of a conflict with the conscientious performance of Government responsibilities.

§ 2634.1008 Public access to a Certificate of Divestiture.

A Certificate of Divestiture issued pursuant to the provisions of this subpart is available to the public in accordance with the rules of § 2634.603 of this part.

[FR Doc. 04-17200 Filed 7-27-04; 8:45 am]

BILLING CODE 6345-02-P

DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE

Rural Utilities Service

7 CFR Part 1739

RIN 0572-AB94

Broadband Grant Program

AGENCY: Rural Utilities Service, USDA.

ACTION: Final rule.

SUMMARY: The Rural Utilities Service (RUS) is publishing regulations to administer the Community Connect Grant Program for the provision of broadband transmission service in rural America. This final rule is intended to establish eligibility and application requirements, the review and approval process, and grant administration procedures for the Community Connect Grant Program.

EFFECTIVE DATE: July 28, 2004.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION CONTACT: Roberta D. Purcell, Assistant Administrator, Telecommunications Program, Rural Utilities Service, STOP 1590, 1400 Independence Avenue SW., Washington, DC 20250-1590, Telephone (202) 720-9554, Facsimile (202) 720-0810. Email address: Bobbie.Purcell@usda.gov.

SUPPLEMENTARY INFORMATION:

Executive Order 12866

This final rule has been determined to be not significant for purposes of Executive Order 12866, and therefore has not been reviewed by the Office of Management and Budget (OMB).

Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance

The Catalog of Federal Domestic Assistance (CFDA) Program number assigned to the Community Connect Grant Program is 10.863. The Catalog is available on a subscription basis from

the Superintendent of Documents, the United States Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402-9325, telephone number (202) 512-1800.

Executive Order 12372

This program is not subject to the requirements of Executive Order 12372, "Intergovernmental Review of Federal Programs," as implemented under USDA's regulations at 7 CFR part 3015.

Executive Order 12988

This final rule has been reviewed under Executive Order 12988, Civil Justice Reform. RUS has determined that this final rule meets the applicable standards provided in section 3 of the Executive Order. In addition, all state and local laws and regulations that are in conflict with this rule will be preempted, no retroactive effect will be given to this rule, and, in accordance with Section 212(e) of the Department of Agriculture Reorganization Act of 1994 (7 U.S.C. 6912(e)), administrative appeal procedures, if any, must be exhausted before an action against the Department or its agencies may be initiated.

Executive Order 13132, Federalism

The policies contained in this final rule do not have any substantial direct effect on states, on the relationship between the national government and the states, or on the distribution of power and responsibilities among the various levels of government. Nor does this final rule impose substantial direct compliance costs on state and local governments. Therefore, consultation with states is not required.

Regulatory Flexibility Certification

Pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 553(a)(2), this final rule related to grants is exempt from the rulemaking requirements of the Administrative Procedure Act (5 U.S.C. 551 *et seq.*), including the requirement to provide prior notice and an opportunity for public comment. Because this final rule is not subject to a requirement to provide prior notice and an opportunity for public comment pursuant to 5 U.S.C. 553, or any other law, the analytical requirements of the Regulatory Flexibility Act (5 U.S.C. 601 *et seq.*) are inapplicable.

Unfunded Mandates

This final rule contains no Federal mandates (under the regulatory provision of Title II of the Unfunded Mandates Reform Act of 1995) for State, local, and tribal governments or the private sector. Therefore, this final rule is not subject to the requirements of sections 202 and 205 of the Unfunded Mandates Reform Act of 1995.